Reflections of a Concerned Muslim

On the Plight of Oppressed People

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Ali Shariati was born in Mazinan, a suburb of Mashhad, Iran. He completed his elementary and high school in Mashhad. In his years at the Teacher's Training College, he came into contact with youth who were from the lower economic strata of the society and tasted the poverty and hardship that existed.

At the age of eighteen, he started as a teacher and ever since had been a student as well as a teacher. After graduating from college in 1960, on a scholarship he pursued graduate studies in France. Dr. Shariati, an honor student, received his doctorate in sociology in 1964

When he returned to Iran, he was arrested at the border and imprisoned on the pretext that he had participated in political activities while studying in France. Released in 1965, he began teaching again at Mashhad University. As a Muslim sociologist, he sought to explain the problems of Muslim societies in the light of Islamic principles - explaining them and discussing them with his students. Very soon, he gained popularity with the students and different social classes in Iran. For this reason, the regime felt obliged to discontinue his courses at the university.

Then he was transferred to Tehran. There, Dr. Shariati continued his very active and brilliant career. His lectures at the Hosseiniye-Irshad Religious Institute attracted not only six thousand students who registered in his summer classes, but also many thousands of people from different backgrounds who were fascinated by his teachings.

The first edition of his book ran over sixty thousand copies which were quickly sold-out, despite the obstructive interferences by the authorities in Iran. Faced with the outstanding success of Dr.

Shariati's courses, the Iranian police surrounded Hosseiniye-Irshad Institute, arrested many of his followers and thereby put an end to his activities. For the second time, he underwent an eighteen month prison term under extremely harsh conditions. Popular pressure and international protests obliged the Iranian regime to release Dr. Shariati on March 20, 1975. However, he remained under close surveillance by the security agents of Iran. This was no freedom at all since he could neither publish his thoughts nor contact his students. Under such stifling conditions, according to the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) he realized that he should migrate out of the country. Successful in his attempt, he went to England but he suddenly died three weeks later in suspicious circumstances on June 19, 1977. According to his will, he is buried in the courtyard of Holy Shrine of Seyyida Zainab (sa) in Damascus.

Dr. Shariati studied and experienced many philosophical, theological and social schools of thought within an Islamic view. One could say that he was a Muslim Muhajir who rose from the depth of the ocean of eastern mysticism, ascended to the heights of the formidable mountains of western social sciences, yet was not overwhelmed, and he returned to our midst with all the jewels of this fantastic voyage.

He was neither a reactionary fanatic who opposed anything that was new without any knowledge nor was he of the so called westernized intellectuals who imitated the west without independent judgment.

Knowledgeable about the conditions and forces of his time, he began his Islamic revival with enlightenment of the masses, particularly the youth. He believed that if these elements of the society had true faith, they would totally dedicate themselves and become active and Mujahid elements who would give everything, including their lives - for their ideals.

Dr. Shariati constantly fought to create humanitarian values in the young generation, a generation whose values have been defaced with the help of the most scientific and technical methods. He vigorously tried to reintroduce the Qur'an and Islamic history to the youth so that they may find their true selves in all their human dimensions and fight all the decadent societal forces.

Dr. Shariati wrote many books. Some of his works are listed at the end of this book. In all his writings, he tried to present a clear and genuine picture of Islam. He strongly believed that if the intellectual and new generation realized the truth of this faith, attempts toward social change would be successful.

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Dr. Ali Shariati

Doctorate of Sociology and Islamic History from Sorbonne University, France, Professor of Mashhad University, Iran

If I confide in you personally, it is because I want to share a personal experience with you. It concerns me because it relates to my class, community, country and history.

I am familiar with the thoughts of educated people. My predecessors, of the remote past where they disappeared in the flow of history, were poverty- stricken people. I, personally, am related to the nobles but not to those whose nobility is the product of silver and gold.

I am deeply interested in human heritage and civilization. My primary interest has always been to reflect on the works of people who inhabited the earth before us.

In Greece, I saw the temple of Delphi which thrilled me because of its artistic beauty and skill. In Rome, I visited the museum of arts and architecture of temples and great palaces. In the Far East, in China and Vietnam, there are mountains which were shaped by human hands and brains into temples for the gods and their representatives on earth (the religious clergymen). These human legacies are precious to me.

Last summer during my visit to Africa, I decided to see the three pyramids in Egypt. Because of its vast surroundings, this great

monument of civilization occupied my thoughts. I hastened to see one of the seven wonders of the past - the Pyramids.

Wholeheartedly. I began to listen to the guide's explanations about the structure. We learned that slaves had to bring eight-hundred million blocks of stones from Aswan to Cairo in order to construct six large and three small Pyramids. Eight-hundred million blocks of stones were brought to Cairo from a place which was nine hundred and eighty miles away to construct a building wherein the mummified bodies of the Pharaohs are to be preserved. Inside, the graves are made of five blocks of marble. Four of the blocks are used for the walls and one is used for the ceiling. To imagine the diameter of the weight of the marble blocks used for the ceiling of the grave, it is sufficient to visualize that on this block, millions of blocks of stones were piled on top of each other until the top of the Pyramid was completed. Since five thousand years ago, the ceiling has been supporting this load.

I was amazed by this wonderful work. At a distance of three to four hundred years, I saw some scattered blocks of stones. "What are they?" I asked the guide. He said, "Nothing. Only a few blocks of stones." Of the thirty thousand slaves who brought the heavy blocks of stones from hundreds of miles away, on a daily basis, hundreds of them were crushed under the heavy loads. The place I inquired about is where they were buried. So unimportant were they in the system of slavery, that hundreds of them were buried collectively in one ditch. Those who survived had to carry the heavy loads. I told the guide that I would like to see the slaves who were crushed into dust. The guide exclaimed, "There is nothing to see!" He pointed to the graves of the slaves who were buried near the Pyramids by order of the Pharaohs; this was done so their souls could be employed as slaves just as their bodies were.

I requested that the guide leave me alone. I then went to those graves and sat down, feeling very close to the people buried

in those ditches. It was as if we were of the same race. It is true that each of us came from different geographical areas but these differences are inconsequential when viewed as a basis for dividing mankind. For out of this phenomenon arose the concepts of strangers and relatives. I was not involved in this system of classification and racial division; therefore, I had nothing but warm feelings and sympathy toward these oppressed souls. I looked back to the Pyramids and realized that despite their magnificence, they were so strange to and distant from me! In other words, I felt so much hatred towards the great monuments of civilization which throughout history were raised upon the bones of my predecessors! My predecessors also built the great walls of China. Those who could not carry the loads were crushed under the heavy stones and put into the walls with the stones. This was how all the great monuments of civilization were constructed - at the expense of the flesh and blood of my predecessors!

I viewed civilization as a curse. I felt a burning hatred for the thousands of years of oppression against my predecessors. I realized that the feelings of all those people buried together in the ditches were once the same as mine. I returned from my visit and wrote one of them a letter describing what had transpired in the past five thousand years. He was not living in those thousands of years, but slavery existed in one form or another!

I sat down and wrote him:

They pushed us forward to fight people whom we did not even know nor did they know us. We were compelled to kill people whom we did not despise. Some were of our own class, race and destiny. For a long time, our old and helpless parents kept looking for a way to contact us, but their searching eyes never got an answer. According to one thinker, these fights were like wars between two parties who did not know each other but were fighting on behalf of

those who knew each other well!! They forced us to fight, to massacre, and to be massacred. Our fathers and mothers as well as their ruined farms suffered the loss. If victory was achieved, it was others who enjoyed its bounties, not us.

My friend, after you died a great change occurred. The Pharaohs and big powers of history altered their views. This made us happy. Previously, they believed that their souls were eternal; therefore, they believed that if the body was preserved, the soul could maintain a relationship with the body. This was why they made us construct those great yet cruel buildings. However, now they have become wiser. They no longer think about death. We have great news! They have given up those old beliefs. We are spared from transporting eight-hundred million blocks of stones from hundreds of miles away to build graves.

My friend, unfortunately, this "good news" proved to be short-lived! After you passed away, they again stepped into our countries to capture us as laborers. Once again, we have to carry loads but not for their graves; they no longer care about them. This time, it is for their palaces-great palaces besides which our generation is buried!

We lived in despair, but once again a flash of hope for survival appeared. Great prophets carne forth. There was Zoroaster, Buddha the g:reat and Confucius the philosopher. A gate toward salvation was opened. The "gods" sent their messengers to save us from disgrace of slavery: worship replaced cruelty. Unfortunately, we had bad luck. The prophets, who left their prophetic homes behind and disregarded us, proceeded to the palaces.

We had strong faith in Confucius, the philosopher, because he addressed himself to the question of man and the community. However, he also became a friend of the princes. Buddha, who was a prince, also deserted us. He turned within himself to reach the

state of "Nirvana"" but we do not know where this state is. Buddha developed many great. and ascetic rules. As for Zoroaster, he began his mission from Azerbaijan, Iran.

Disregarding our mourning and scars from the lashes inflicted on our bodies by the masters, he continued to Balkh and then to court of Kashtasib, who was king at that time.

My friend. you were sacrificed for the graves while we were sacrificed for the palaces! suddenly, besides the Pharaohs and others who employed us as their slaves, there appeared those -who claimed to be successors of the prophets and professional spiritual teachers.

From Palestine to Iran, from Egypt to China and throughout all parts of the earth where there was civilization, we had to carry the loads of stones to construct temples, palaces, and graves. Again in the name of charity, the representatives of the "gods" and the successors of the prophets began to loot us. Again, in the name of holy war, we were pushed into the battlefields. We had to sacrifice our innocent children for the "gods", temples, and idols!

My friend, for thousands of years, our destiny became worse than yours. Three-fifths of the wealth in Iran went to the Mobedans (old Persian clergymen) in the name of the gods. We became their servants and slaves. Four-fifths of the wealth in France was taken from us by the clergy of God. The Pharoah clergymen and spiritual teachers of religions have always been successful.

My friend, I am living thousands of years after you. Witnessing all the suffering of my friends, I began to feel that the "gods" hated the slaves. Religion seemed to reinforce the slavery system. Even people more intelligent than us, like Aristotle, theorized that, by nature, some people were born to be slaves and others to be rulers. I began to believe that I was born and destined to slavery.

Amidst all of this hopelessness, I learned that a man had descended down from the mountains saying, "I have been commissioned by God." I trembled thinking that it possibly involved a new deception or new method of cruelty. He stated, "I have been commissioned by God who has promised to have mercy on slaves and those who are weak on earth." Surprise! I still could not believe it, How could it be true? God was speaking with slaves, giving them good news of being saved, and prosperous, and being heirs of the earth.

I had doubts, thinking that he was also one of those prophets of China, India, and etc. His name was Mohammad, I was told that he was an orphan who was a shepherd behind those mountains. I was so surprised. Why did God choose His prophet from among shepherds? I was also informed that his predecessors were prophets; all were chosen from among shepherds. He was the last in that series. With joy and astonishment, I became speechless and trembled. Has God chosen His prophet from among our class?

I began to follow him because I saw my friends around him. Some of those who became leaders of his followers were: Bilal, a slave and son of a slave whose parents were from Abyssinia, Salman, a homeless person from Persia owned as a slave, Abuzar the poverty stricken and anonymous fellow from the desert, and lastly, Salim, the slave of the wife of Hudhayfa and an unimportant black alien.

I believed in the prophet Mohammad since his palace was no more that, just a few rooms constructed of clay. He was among the workers who carried the loads and built the rooms. His court was made of wood and palm-tree leaves. This was everything he had. This was his palace.

I fled from Persia and the ruling system of the Mobedans who pushed us as slaves into war to protect their power and rule from their enemies. I escaped and came to the Prophet's country to

live with the slaves, the homeless, the helpless, and with him. But when he died, "his eyelids under the heaviness of death, curtained our shining sun." once more, the situation began to deteriorate.

My friend, again in his name, magnificent temples rose toward the sky. Swords engraved with the Qur'anic verses on holy war were pointed toward us! His representatives stepped into our homes and took our youth as slaves for the chieftains of their tribes, sold our mothers in distant markets, killed our men in the name of struggle in the way of God, and looted our belongings in the name of charity.

In despair, I could do nothing! A power came into being which, with an appearance of monotheism, really hid idols in the worship-palaces of God! Tricky fires (a fire was holy in pre-Islamic Persia) were glowing. In the name of God's vicegerency and successorship of the prophets, the faces of the Pharaohs and those of the false saints joined hands. They began to strike at us in the name of law. Again, it was the yoke of slavery around our necks which promoted the construction of the Great Mosque of Damascus. The great contests to build splendid mosques, magnificent palaces, beautiful houses for the caliphs in Damascus and the enactment of a thousand and one nights in Baghdad were all done at the expense of our blood and lives; but, this time it was pursued in the name of God! We thought there was no way to safety. Slavery and sacrifice were our unchangeable destinies!

Who was that man called Mohammad? Was his mission deceitful? Or is he (the prophet) and we being sacrificed in the system - a system in which we are decaying in prisons; witnessing the looting and destruction of our possessions and families, and being massacred???

I do not know where to go! Where should I go? Should I go to the Mobedans (clergymen of Persia)? How could I return to those temples which were built to enslave me? Should I join those

who claim to be examples of our national freedom but in essence are attempting to gain their inhuman privileges of the past? The mosques are no better than those temples!

I saw the swords which were engraved with verses on holy war. I saw the places for worship. I saw those who prayed. I saw the saintly faces who spoke in the name of spiritual leadership, the Caliphs and the preservation of the Prophet's traditions. Nevertheless, collectively, they took us into SLAVERY! They, long before my time, struck someone with the sword in a mosque. He was Ali, the son-in-law of that man of God (the Prophet Mohammad). He was killed in a place where God was worshipped. He before me and his family long before mine, were. like the suffering slaves of history, all destroyed. In the name of "charity", his house was looted before ours. The Qur'an long before it was used as an instrument to rob and exploit us, was raised on the swords to defeat Ali!

How strange! Five thousand years later, I found a man who spoke of God. not for the masters but for the slaves. He prayed but not to reach "Nirvana" nor to deceive people nor to unite with God (like the Persians). He prayed for the welfare and prosperity of mankind. I found a man for the whole world. He was a man of justice, one who was strong and disciplined enough to make his older brother the first subject. He was a man whose wife, the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed, worked and suffered deprivation and starvation, during her lifetime as we did. I found a man whose children were the heirs of the red flag which throughout history belonged to our class.

My friend, I have sought refuge in this house which is built of clay due to my fears of the temples, pompous palaces that you know and were sacrificed for by formidable powers. The companions of the prophet are busy. The house is alone. His wife is dying while he is in the garden of Bani Najjar, working and telling

God all about our misery. Fearing the terrifying temples, palaces and treasuries that have accumulated through our labor and blood, I have taken refuge in this house to mourn the sacrifices which were made!

My friend, all those who remained loyal to Ali belonged to our suffering class. He did not adopt his beautiful sermons (recorded in Nahjul Balagha) in order to make excuses for our deprivation nor the excesses of those who seek power. They were adopted to educate and save us. He did not draw his sword to defend himself, his family, his race, nor to defend big powers. It was done to rescue us at all stages. He thinks better than Socrates, not for the sake of demonstrating moral virtues of the noble classes in which slaves have no share, but for the sake of values which we possess. He was not an heir of the Pharaohs or those of similar class. He symbolized thoughts and considerations, not in closed libraries. schools, and academic centers like those who acquire knowledge as an end in itself, living in the world of theories while remaining indifferent to the starving and suffering classes. His thoughts fly high and far. Simultaneously, his abstract thoughts and heart are transferred into sympathy at the sadness of an orphan's face. Concurrently, because he realizes God's greatness, while praying, he does not pay attention to any suffering inflicted on his body by a dagger. However, because of oppression of a Jewish woman, he cries loud saying, "if a person dies because of this disgrace he should not be blamed!" He has excellent abilities to express himself, but never in the manner of one like Shahnama (a poet who praised kings) who makes no mention of our class except once in all of his sixty thousand couplets.

My friend, at this time and in this community, we desperately need him. He is unlike the thinkers, philosophers and others who are either men of thoughts without action and struggle, or men of action without thoughts, wisdom, and piety. If we imagine someone

beside him having all these qualities, perhaps he might not possess the tenderness of feeling, love and pure spirit. Perchance he might lack strong faith in God. He is a man whose essence is extended through all humanitarian dimensions. Like you and I, he works as a laborer. The same hands that recorded the glorious lines of divine guidance merge deep into the soil, tilling and fertilizing salty lands. He works for no one! While he makes water gush forth from the ground, his family looks at his work with joy. Before he and his wife rest, he declares, "good news for my heirs who will not have even one drop from this water as their share." My friend, he has made it a charity for you and me.

We need him. we need leadership like him. The civilizations, educational systems, and religions have made human beings into animals interested only in financial security or selfish and heartless worshippers or men of thought and reason who lack feeling, love and inspiration as well as knowledge, wisdom, and logic. But he is a man who combines all these dimensions in his personality. He is a leader of the working class and those who suffer. He is the expressing power who struggles for the well-being of the community. Sincerity, loyalty, patience, steadfastness, and the concepts of revolution and justice were the main features of his daily messages to the masses.

My friend, I live in a society where I face a system which controls half of the universe, maybe all of it. Mankind is being driven into a new stronghold of slavery. Although we are not in physical slavery, we are truly destined with a fate worse than yours! Our thoughts, hearts, and will powers are enslaved. In the name of sociology, education, art, sexual freedom, financial freedom, love of exploitation, and love of individuals, faith in goals, faith into humanitarian responsibilities and belief in one's own school of thought are entirely taken away from within our hearts! The system

has converted us into empty pots which accommodate whatever is poured inside them!

Now, we in the name of party, blood, land, and system against system, undergo divisions so that each of us can be easily taken into service. His followers that is, the followers of his school of thought, are pushed to fight against one another. why, under a global influence should they consider each other as enemies? One leaves his hands open in prayer while the other folds them together. one prostrates on a piece of clay while the other on a carpet. Fortunately less differentiation is made now! Our thinkers are driven into exile; they have become guardians.

My friend, Ali sacrificed his life for these considerations: School of Thought, Unity and Justice. It was evident in his twenty-three years of struggles and sacrifices to establish faith in the hearts of barbaric parties. It was evident in his twenty-five years of silence and endurance in order to preserve Islamic unity and save it from the dangers of the Roman and Persian empires. It was evident in his five years of work and suffering to achieve justice, using his sword to destroy hatred and liberate man. Though he was not able to achieve this, he managed to impart to us the meaning of the leadership of mankind and religion. He placed his life and the life of his family on these three slogans: School of Thought, Unity and Justice!

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And We desired to show favour to those who were abased in the land, and to make them imams, and to make them the heirs (Qur'an, 28:5)

My friend, you have left this world, but we are carrying the loads for the great civilization, clear victories, and heroic works. They came to our homes at the farms and forced us, as beasts, to build their graves. If we could not carry the stones or complete the task, we were also put into the walls with the stones! Others took the pride and credit for the work that we did. No mention had ever been made of our contributions.

My friend, knowing that you were a slave, you could identify your master. You could endure the whip-lashed on your body. Why, how, and who you slaves? We are facing the same destiny as yours, but unable to know why it exists. Who is making us slaves of this century? From where are we being invaded? Why are we submissive to misleading thoughts? Why are we engaged in worldly worships? Like animals, we have become victims of exploitation - even more so than your era and race!

We work for the systems, powers, machines and palaces which are maintained through our efforts. Riches are accumulated through our hard labor but our share is such a small portion; therefore, we are obliged to work the following day. We are more deprived than you! Cruelty and discrimination are more severe than that of your time!